

4.16 VISUAL QUALITY

INTRODUCTION

Visual quality is generally defined as those features of a landscape that attract viewer interest and promote a favorable impression. Visual quality is subjective in nature and definitions of what is pleasing visually will vary from individual to individual. The following section addresses project impacts on the visual resources and aesthetic character of Fresno County's natural environment. Issues include potential impacts to scenic views and vistas and impacts associated with an increase of urban light sources within the area.

Topics discussed in this section that overlap other sections of this EIR include: open space, streets and highways, biological resources, and rangelands.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The physical environment is a key component in planning for future county growth since it contributes directly to the perceived desirability of the county as a place to live, work, and visit. This, in turn, has consequences for the economic vitality of the county since it affects the types and quantity of businesses and residents that ultimately will settle in Fresno County.

Fresno County has a diverse visual landscape that gradually changes from east to west. Starting from the east are the Sierra Mountains which are rich in coniferous forests and provide scenic views of the varied topography. There are several large reservoirs such as Millerton Lake, Huntington Lake, and Shaver Lake scattered throughout the Sierra which provide recreational as well as scenic opportunities. The San Joaquin and Kings Rivers, which originate high in the Sierra Mountains, are the county's two major rivers. Two scenic highways, Highway 168 and Highway 180, extend down from the Sierras and terminate in the Eastside Valley area. In addition, there are several scenic drives that wind their way through the Sierra and Sierra Foothill areas. The County's built environment is located throughout the valley and much of it located along the Highway 99 corridor. Agricultural lands consisting of orchards, vineyards, ranches, and various row crops start on the fringe of these communities and extend to cover much of the valley floor. These large farms provide a sense of open space, emphasize the county's rural and farming heritage, and allow motorists opportunities for unrestricted panoramic views. The Coastal Foothills, containing gentle rolling hills with scattered oak trees, extend westward past Interstate 5. Due to the continuous unrestrictive views of adjacent coastal foothills, Interstate 5 (I-5) is an officially designated scenic highway.

REGULATORY SETTING

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) administers the California Scenic Highway Program, which is the only official program in Fresno County designed to protect and enhance scenic/visual resources. The goal of the California Scenic Highway Program is to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of California. The program develops and implements a scenic corridor protection program containing five accepted land use planning standards. A legislatively- appointed body, the Departmental Transportation Advisory Committee (DTAC), has the responsibility of recommending program criteria, reviewing applications and recommending eligible highways for official scenic highway designation, and advising the Director of Caltrans to revoke the official designation of any existing scenic highway which is no longer in compliance with the program. Other regulations that assist in minimizing impacts from urban land uses, to some extent, include County zoning and development standards and regulations.

PLAN ELEMENTS

The Draft General Plan contains the following policies aimed at preserving scenic views and panoramas and designating and maintaining scenic roadways including highways, scenic drives, and landscaped drives.

Scenic Resources

- Policy OS-K.1 The County shall encourage the preservation of outstanding scenic views, panoramas, and vistas wherever possible. Methods to achieve this could include encouraging private property owners to enter into open space easements for designated scenic areas.
- Policy OS-K.2 The County shall identify and map significant scenic resources within the County and shall develop a program to manage these resources.
- Policy OS-K.3 The County should preserve areas of natural scenic beauty and provide for public access to scenic vistas by purchasing sites for park use.
- Policy OS-K.4 The County should require development adjacent to scenic areas, vistas, and roadways to incorporate natural features of the site and be developed to minimize impacts to the scenic qualities of the site.

Scenic Roadways

- Policy OS-L.1 The County designates a system of scenic roadways that includes landscaped drives, scenic drives, and scenic highways. Definitions and designated roadways are shown in the text box below.
- Policy OS-L.2 The County shall manage designated landscaped drives and adjacent land based on the following principles:
 - a. Maintenance and improvement of landscaped drives should be directed toward preserving and enhancing the quality of the landscape within the right-of-way. Where deemed necessary or desirable, the Board of Supervisors should, by resolution, assume responsibility for maintenance and improvement of landscaped drives; and
 - b. Development of land adjoining landscaped drives should be planned and designed to preserve the quality and integrity of the roadside landscape.

- Policy OS-L.3 The County shall manage the use of land adjacent to scenic drives and scenic highways based on the following principles:
- a. Timber harvesting within or adjacent to the right-of-way shall be limited to that which is necessary to maintain and enhance the quality of the forest;
 - b. Proposed high voltage overhead transmission lines and towers shall be routed to minimize detrimental effects on scenic amenities visible from the right-of-way;
 - c. Installation of signs visible from the right-of-way shall be limited to business identification signs, onsite real estate signs, and traffic control signs necessary to maintain safe traffic conditions. All billboards and other advertising structures shall be prohibited from location within view of the right-of-way;
 - d. Intensive land development proposals including, but not limited to, subdivisions of more than four lots, commercial developments, and mobile home parks shall be designed to blend into the natural landscape and minimize visual scarring of vegetation and terrain. The design of said development proposals shall also provide for maintenance of a natural open space area 200 feet in depth parallel to the right-of-way. Modification of the setback requirement may be appropriate when any one of the following conditions exist:
 - 1) Topographic or vegetative characteristics preclude such a setback;
 - 2) Topographic or vegetative characteristics provide screening of buildings and parking areas from the right-of-way;
 - 3) Property dimensions preclude such a setback; or
 - 4) Development proposal involves expansion of an existing facility or an existing concentration of uses.
 - e. Subdivision proposals shall be designed to minimize the number of right-of-way access drives;
 - f. Developments involving concentration of commercial uses shall be designed to function as an integral unit with common parking areas and right-of-way access drives; and
 - g. Outside storage areas associated with commercial activities shall be completely screened from view of the right-of-way with landscape plantings or artificial screens which harmonize with the natural landscape.
- Policy OS-L.4 The County shall require proposed new development along designated scenic roadways within urban areas and unincorporated communities to underground utility lines on and adjacent to the site of proposed development or, when this is infeasible, to contribute their fair share of funding for future undergrounding.
- Policy OS-L.5 The County road improvement projects involving designated scenic roadways shall be constructed to insure that consideration is given to preservation of ornamental trees consistent with public safety standards and accepted road design.
- Policy OS-L.6 The County shall request city, State, and Federal agencies to maintain County-designated landscaped drives, scenic drives, and scenic highways under their jurisdictions in a manner consistent with the goals and policies in this section.
- Policy OS-L.7 The County shall encourage the State of California to landscape urban freeway and highway routes which pass through Fresno County.
- Policy OS-L.8 The County shall encourage cities within Fresno County to develop complementary policies and principles to enhance the visual qualities of streets and highways within their boundaries.

- Policy OS-L.9 The County shall work with the Department of Transportation to pursue scenic highway designation from the State of California for the State highway segments eligible for such designation (including those listed in the text box below and any other segments added),
- Policy LU-B.11 The County shall require that new development requiring a County discretionary permit be planned and designed to maintain the scenic open space character of rangelands including view corridors of highways. New development shall utilize natural landforms and vegetation in the least visually disruptive way possible, and use design, construction and maintenance techniques that minimize the visibility of structures on hillsides, ridgelines, steep slopes, and canyons.

IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Method of Analysis

Aesthetics and visual resources are subjective by nature, and therefore the level of a project's visual impact is difficult to quantify. In addition, it is difficult to estimate the impact development would have on scenic resources, since individual development projects can enhance the aesthetic quality of an area. Therefore, this analysis was conducted qualitatively, assessing potential growth implications of the Land Diagram, including the potential degradation of the existing visual character of the county, particularly its scenic resources. The Draft General Plan policies are evaluated to determine the extent to which they would protect existing resources, and minimize the degradation of visual quality.

Standards of Significance

For the purposes of this EIR, a significant environmental impact would occur if the Proposed Project would:

- result in a land use pattern that significantly changes the existing visual quality of the region, such as natural viewsheds or scenic vistas;
- eliminate visual resources either directly or cumulatively; or
- cause the production of light and glare which results in negative aesthetic effects to adjacent lands.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

4.16-1 Development under the Draft General Plan could create land use patterns that would substantially alter the existing visual character of the region and/or visual access to scenic resources.

Fresno County contains a variety of terrain and vistas that could be considered scenic, particularly views of rural farmland, the foothills and the Sierra Nevada. Land development anticipated under the Draft

General Plan could alter these views by converting undeveloped areas to urban uses. In addition, views could be interrupted by multistory buildings. Specific impacts on visual resources cannot be addressed until particular development projects are identified and reviewed. The potential loss or degradation of such resources is considered a **significant impact**.

It should be noted that most of the development occurring by 2020, approximately 89 percent of total acreage, would occur whether or not the Proposed Project was adopted. Furthermore, more than 93 percent of projected development (by acreage) would occur within incorporated areas and proximate areas within cities' spheres of influence. New development within existing urban areas is likely to be consistent with its surrounding visual character, and less likely to occur in areas considered scenic than development in the unincorporated areas, which are generally more rural than the cities. At the same time, larger scale, multistory buildings, which could block long distance views, would be more likely to be constructed in urban areas.

The proposed General Plan contains several policies that minimize potential visual impacts from new development. Policies OS-K.1, OS-K.2, OS-K.3, and OS-K.4 would maintain the existing visual quality by encouraging the preservation of outstanding scenic views, panoramas, and vistas; developing programs to manage these resources; ensuring public access to scenic vistas; and requiring development adjacent to scenic areas, vistas, and roadways to incorporate natural features of the site and be developed to minimize impacts to the scenic qualities of the site. Policy OS-L.4 requires proposed new development along designated scenic roadways to underground utility lines on and adjacent to the site of proposed development or, when this is infeasible, to contribute its fair share of funding for future undergrounding. Policy LU-B.11 requires that new development, including grading, be planned and designed to maintain the scenic open space character of rangelands, including view corridors of highways. It also requires that new development utilize natural landforms and vegetation in the least visually disruptive way possible, and use design, construction and maintenance techniques that minimize the visibility of structures on hillsides, ridgelines, steep slopes, and canyons.

Since much of the county's scenic resources such as scenic highways, scenic drives, mountains, and forests are located away from the urban development areas and no new significant amount of development is planned in the rural areas of the county, implementation of the Draft General Plan policies would ensure that the visual quality of the unincorporated areas is not substantially altered by new development. Therefore, impacts on scenic views are considered less than significant for Fresno County. Similar measures are available to, and required by some of the cities in the county. However, the County cannot ensure that similar measures would be enforced for development (whether related to the Proposed Project or not) within cities under whose jurisdiction most of the future growth would occur. Furthermore, the development of over 37,000 acres, even if it occurs primarily within urban areas, would substantially alter the visual character of some areas. Therefore, the impact is considered **significant**.

Mitigation Measures

4.16-1 *No mitigation is required beyond Draft General Plan Policies OS-K.1 through OS-K.4, OS-L.4, and LU-B.11 for Fresno County. No mitigation measures are available to the County to reduce impacts occurring within the cities' jurisdiction.*

Although Draft General Plan policies would minimize alterations to the visual quality of the unincorporated areas of the County, implementation of similar policies within the incorporated areas is not within the County's jurisdiction to monitor and enforce. Therefore, the impact is considered significant and unavoidable.

4.16-2 Development under the Draft General Plan would introduce new sources of light and glare into development areas and surrounding rural areas.

Future development under the Draft General Plan would increase the amount of light in the county due to street lighting, flood lights, security lighting, private residential lights, and automobile headlights.

Within the unincorporated areas, new development would introduce a ambient urban light to a very rural area with only isolated lighting at present. The increase in development throughout the county (incorporated and unincorporated areas) will substantially increase the amount of ambient light, interfering with views of the night sky, especially in more urbanized areas, and altering the nighttime character of the county. This is considered a **significant impact**.

Mitigation Measures

4.16-2 *In approving new development, the County shall require that lighting standards be designed and constructed to minimize the project contribution to ambient light production and to preclude "spillover" of light onto adjacent light-sensitive (e.g., residences, hospitals) properties.*

The above mitigation measure(s) would reduce the effects of "spillover" light, but not to a less-than-significant level, for development under the County's jurisdiction. Even this type of light fixture would be visible, so it could change the rural character of some of the unincorporated areas (where there are very few or no lights at present). Furthermore, the majority of new lighting would occur in areas that are outside of County jurisdiction. Similar measures would be available to other jurisdictions, but the County cannot ensure that they are implemented. For these reasons, the impact is considered significant and unavoidable.

Cumulative Impacts

The cumulative context is county-wide development through the year 2020.

4.16-3 Development under the Draft General Plan, in combination with other development in the County, could create land use patterns that would substantially alter the existing visual character of the region and/or visual access to scenic resources and the introduction of new sources of light and glare into development areas and surrounding rural areas.

Much of the Central Valley is characterized by rural agricultural lands. The foothills and Sierra Nevada are sparsely populated, and retain much of their natural character. The development of the Project, in combination with the other development in the Central Valley would extend the urban edge by converting currently undeveloped land to urban and suburban uses. Views along rural or scenic highways would change with the introduction of residential and commercial development, streets, and night lighting. Rural communities may lose some of their small-town character as they grow. Because it would foster growth associated with economic development, the Project would contribute considerably to the cumulative alteration of the visual character of the Central Valley. This is considered a **significant impact**.

Mitigation Measures

4.16-3 *None available beyond Draft General Plan Policies OS-K.1 through OS-K.4, OS-L.4, and LU-B.11 and Mitigation Measure 4.16-2.*

Implementation of the Draft General Policies listed above would reduce the project's contribution to this significant cumulative impact, but not to less-than-significant levels, and such measures would not reduce the cumulative effect to less-than-significant levels. Therefore, the cumulative impact would remain significant and unavoidable.